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ABSTRACT

"Agenda-setting" is a concept that describes the effect of the news media on social groups and public opinion on major issues. Recent studies in communication are focusing on the power of the media, by selection of and emphasis on selected news, to influence public attention and to raise certain issues high on the public "agenda." The effect of the media on any individual depends on his level of need for orientation, as documented in the literature. The need for orientation leads to media use, which in turn leads to agenda-setting. Surveys conducted in North Carolina in the spring of 1972 led to the conclusion that there are strong positive relationships between the level of need for orientation and both the amount of use of mass communication and the degree of susceptibility to its agenda-setting effect. (RN)

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Voters' Need for Orientation and Use of Mass Communication

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Students of the press, friend and foe, long have speculated on the "impact" of mass media upon society. While speculation is abundant, evidence of concrete "impact" of media news and entertainment upon behavior is often unclear (or lacking). But in a promising move, communication scientists recently have turned to studying the power of the mass media, by choosing and emphasizing selected news, to focus public attention on particular issues, to raise these issues high on the public "agenda."

For one major type of news crucial to a democracy, issues in Presidential campaigns,*the press through day-to-day selection and play of news does influence what is on this agenda. As Cohen (1963) has succinctly put it in a study of foreign policy news: "It /the press/ may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." Since the press -- both newspapers and television -- are our major avenues of information about issues facing the nation, assertion of this agenda-setting function of the press is quite plausible.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) found strong evidence of agenda-setting among undecided voters in the 1968 Presidential campaign. The issues nominated by those voters as the most important ones facing the nation closely matched the issues emphasized in the press serving those voters. While the idea of agenda-setting can be operationalized in various ways, McCombs and Shaw compared the rank-orders of the issues suggested by voters with the rank-orders of the issues in the press. What the voters considered most important -- Vietnam -- was receiving heaviest play in the press. What voters considered second most important -- law and order -- was receiving second heaviest play in the press. This matchup of voter choice and media emphasis was true generally for all the other major issues.

*The key role of issues in Presidential campaigns is discussed in V. O. Key, Jr. (1966) The Responsible Electorate. Random House.

Moreover, this agenda-setting "effect" of the press overrode "selective perception" as an alternative way of explaining voter choice. Voters' assessments of the important issues more closely matched the agenda suggested by the total news coverage than it matched the agenda emanating from the candidate they leaned toward. Undecided voters did not merely listen to their "own" candidates; they apparently kept a more open mind.

Overall, these early results suggest that the study of agenda-setting is a fruitful approach to the analysis of mass communication and political behavior. Scholars and journalists have probed and speculated about this political impact of the mass media from the benchmark Erie County study in 1940 to the spate of recent books on television and image-making. Summing up early findings, Klapper (1960) said: "Mass communication ordinarily does not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather functions among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences."

His summary emphasizes two characteristics important for fruitful analysis of the role of mass communication in politics. First, the kinds of effects to be found are not likely to be direct, "hypodermic" effects. The early research on voters and mass communication cast aside 1984 theories of mass communication effects. Looking for significant attitude change and failing to find any, researchers emphasized the nullifying effects of selective perception and instead asserted the "Law of Minimal Consequences." Put another way, little affective attitude change is likely to be produced by the mass media during a political campaign. But the concept of agenda-setting suggests a cognitive change, a shift in perspective and salience of attitudes rather than deep seated affective attitude changes.

Klapper's comment secondly emphasizes the importance of setting. Explication of an agenda-setting function of the press must include the relevant social and personal characteristics that mediate such an effect. The traditional "effects orientation" of communication research must be combined with the "information-seeking" or "uses and gratifications" approach.

"Agenda-setting" is a sociological concept describing the effect of the news media on social groups and public opinion. But of course the basic explanation of those effects lies at the psychological level, within the individual citizen. At the psychological level, our major theoretical assertion is that every individual has a need for orientation. Each individual feels some need to be familiar with his surroundings, both his physical and cognitive environment. In terms of Tolman's (1932) concept of cognitive mapping, each individual will strive to "map" his world, to fill in enough detail to orient himself, to intellectually find his way around.

Importance of the concept of need for orientation--and use of mass communication in fulfilling this need--is documented in the literature (Maslow, 1963; Westley and Barrow, 1959). In a political setting, Mueller (1970) studied a Los Angeles junior college board election (with 133 candidates) where the usual orienting cues of party affiliation and incumbency were unavailable. But four cues, including endorsement by the Los Angeles Times, seem to have been used by voters for orientation and accounted for the majority of variance in the vote distribution. Similarly, McCombs (1967) found that different levels of needs for orientation accounted for the varying effectiveness of newspaper editorial endorsements in selected California political contests.

In outline, then, our theory asserts that need for orientation leads to media use, which in turn leads to agenda-setting. As an individual strives to map the political issues through the use of the mass media he is susceptible (at least in some situations) to the agenda-setting effects of the mass media. This observation calls for a more detailed examination of the "need for orientation" concept in order to determine (1) exactly why some people use the news media more than others and (2) why some are more sus-

ceptible to the agenda-setting effect of the media than others. In terms of political information the broad questions are: What brings voters to attend to various communication sources? And what accounts for their effects?

Jones and Gerard (1967) suggest that motivation to seek information will increase with (a) degree of uncertainty, (b) importance, or relevance, of the information for action decisions, and (c) the likelihood that a reliable source of information is available to shed light on the topic of concern.

Because the news media (newspapers and television in particular) permeate nearly every aspect of American life and are readily available sources of political information for most citizens, Jones and Gerard's last factor was taken as a given, and only the first two factors used in devising a model describing differing levels of need for orientation.

If relevance and uncertainty are in fact important psychological pre-conditions for arousal of a need for orientation, relevance must naturally precede uncertainty in time, since it is logically unsound to speak of a person being uncertain about a subject of which he has no knowledge or which is totally irrelevant to him.

This reasoning seems consistent with Berlyne's (1960) description of thinking as a reaction to a gap in a cognitive map, an intervention when a conceptual configuration has something missing that is needed to give it closure. In this situation, the subject has information about some elements of the situation or no gap (uncertainty) exists.

Other scholars have hinted at the importance of relevance and uncertainty in creating a need for orientation. Westley and Barrow (1959) write of a "news-seeking attribute" as a persistent tendency to place a positive value on information potentially relevant to the individual's

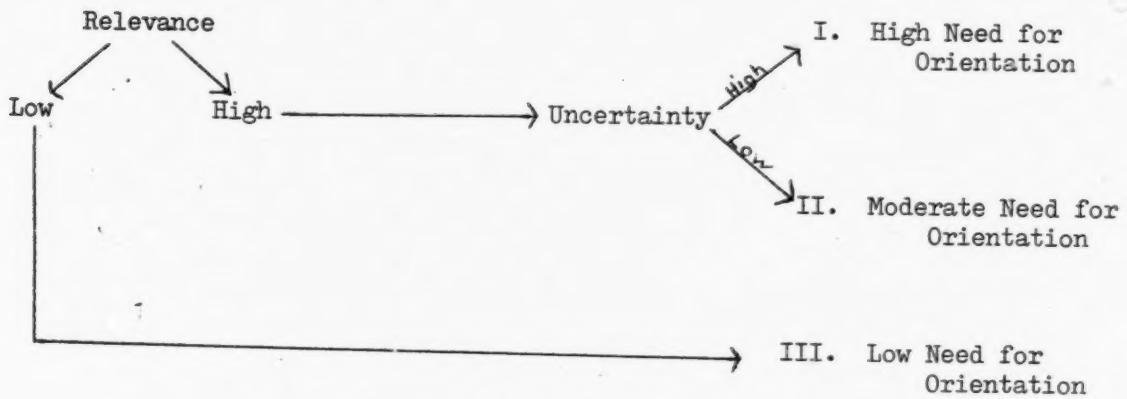
orientation to his surroundings. Wade and Schramm (1969) write:

> From school we emerge with a cognitive map, with an organized life space, and with certain learning skills and habits. More education means more skills and wider interests--in other words a more complex map. Through the media we chiefly fill in this map. (p. 209)

Chaffee et al. (1969) found in several information-seeking experiments that respondents consistently exposed themselves to relevant information, regardless of whether the message was favorable or unfavorable, and avoided irrelevant information. Donohew and Palmgreen (1971) conclude that information utility and relevance are important variables to be considered when studying information-seeking.

So the model constructed describes levels of need for orientation in terms of differing amounts of relevance and uncertainty.

Antecedents of Need for Orientation



In this model it is asserted that low relevance results in a low need for orientation (Group III), high relevance and low uncertainty results in a moderate need for orientation (Group II), and high relevance and high uncertainty results in a high need for orientation (Group I).

The implications of this model with regard to political information-seeking and agenda-setting are stated in these hypotheses:

Hyp. 1. Group I subjects more frequently use newspapers and television for political information than Group II subjects. In turn, Group II subjects more frequently use newspapers and television for political information than Group III subjects.

(I > II > III: use of newspapers and TV)

Hyp. 2. The agenda of national political issues among Group I subjects will more closely approximate the agenda of issues provided by newspapers and television than will the agenda of Group II subjects. (This is actually an hypothesis of more general (less selective) attention to news media content by Group I subjects than by Group II subjects.) In turn, the agenda of national issues among Group II subjects will more closely approximate the agenda of issues provided by newspapers and television than will the agenda of Group III subjects. (Again, this is actually an hypothesis of more general (less selective) attention to news media content by Group II subjects than Group III subjects.)

(I > II > III: agenda-setting)

The data used for testing these hypotheses came from two surveys conducted in Durham and Charlotte, N. C., in the spring and summer of 1972. The subjects interviewed were randomly chosen from lists of registered voters in economically and racially differing precincts of both cities. The interviewers in each case were trained by the School of Journalism. In addition, the news media (newspapers and television news shows) frequently attended to by these voters were content-analyzed for the number of references to national issues to produce rank-order agendas of the political issues.

A variety of operational definitions of the concepts of relevance and uncertainty were used to test the theoretical soundness of the relationships portrayed by our model. To measure the relevance of politics three variables were used: (1) level of interest in the Presidential campaign, (2) amount of discussion about specific political issues, and (3) amount of discussion about politics in general. To measure a sub-

ject's degree of uncertainty about politics three variables were also used: (1) the consistency (or lack of it) in a person's voting record over the last four Presidential elections, (2) the strength of his political party identification, and (3) the degree of certainty about his choice of a Presidential candidate.

Thus, the indicators of relevance were largely measures of political interest and the indicators of uncertainty were primarily measures of political party identification. Use of political interest to measure relevance is obvious. Use of party identification to measure uncertainty is based on the frequent empirical finding that party identification is a major determinant of the vote and therefore, in our view, a major orienting cue for voters. In the absence of strong party identification the independent voter is deprived of a convenient orienting cue and would have a high degree of uncertainty as he faces the task of choosing a candidate. Both political interest and party identification have been shown to be useful predictors of information-seeking in the mass media. But their status in the literature is that of empirical generalizations, not theoretical statements. The attempt here is to place these concepts in a theoretical context.

As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, the first portion of Hypothesis 1 (Group I uses media for political information more than Group II) was supported for newspapers in five of the seven comparisons. For television all seven comparisons support the hypothesis. Looking at the latter portion of Hypothesis 1 (Group II > Group III) the newspaper data support the hypothesis in all seven comparisons and the TV data in four of seven comparisons. Overall, 23 of the 28 possible comparisons support Hypothesis 1. It also should be noted that when only the high and low need for orientation groups are compared (Group I vs. Group III) all the data is consistent with the

TABLE 1. NEED FOR ORIENTATION AND FREQUENT USE OF NEWSPAPERS FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION.

	LEVELS OF NEED FOR ORIENTATION		
	I.	II.	III.
A.	50%[a]	38%	36%
B.	63%	65%	46%

Operational Definitions:
Relevance -- Interest in presidential campaign
Uncertainty -- Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Sources:
A. Durham Survey, Spring 1972 (N=60)
B. Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

C.	37%	42%	31%

Relevance: Interest in presidential campaign
Uncertainty: Strength of political party affiliation
Source: Durham Survey, Spring 1972 (N=60)

D.	67%	58%	45%

Relevance: Discussion of political issues
Uncertainty: How strongly feel about presidential preference?
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

E.	68%	65%	45%

Relevance: Discussion of politics
Uncertainty: How strongly feel about presidential preference?
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

F.	72%	64%	50%

Relevance: Discussion of political issues
Uncertainty: Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

G.	83%	70%	47%

Relevance: Discussion of politics
Uncertainty: Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

[a]Indicates that 50% of the subjects in Group I (High Need for Orientation) were frequent users of a newspaper to follow politics, 38% of the subjects in Group II were frequent users, and 36% of the subjects in Group III were frequent users.

TABLE 2. NEED FOR ORIENTATION AND FREQUENT USE OF TELEVISION FOR POLITICAL INFORMATION

	LEVELS OF NEED FOR ORIENTATION		
	I.	II.	III.
A.	67%[a]	43%	44%
B.	65%	52%	35%

Operational Definitions:
Relevance: Interest in presidential campaign
Uncertainty: Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Sources:
A. Durham Survey, Spring 1972 (N=60)
B. Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

C.	58%	42%	41%

Relevance: Interest in presidential campaign
Uncertainty: Strength of political party affiliation
Source: Durham Survey, Spring 1972 (N=60)

D.	65%	47%	49%

Relevance: Discussion of political issues
Uncertainty: How strongly feel about presidential preference
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

E.	59%	49%	50%

Relevance: Discussion of politics
Uncertainty: How strongly feel about presidential preference
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

F.	70%	48%	43%

Relevance: Discussion of political issues
Uncertainty: Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

G.	71%	52%	42%

Relevance: Discussion of politics
Uncertainty: Voting history (1968, 1964, 1960, 1956)
Source: Charlotte Survey, June 1972 (N=380)

[a]Indicates that 67% of the subjects in Group I (High Need for Orientation) were frequent users of television to follow politics, 43% of the subjects in Group II were frequent users of television, and 44% of the subjects in Group III were frequent users.

hypothesis. Need for orientation, defined by degree of relevance and uncertainty, does sharply discriminate use of the mass media to obtain political information.

Need for orientation also is related to the agenda-setting effect of the newspaper. Table 3 compares the agenda of each group defined by our model with the agenda yielded by a content analysis of the Charlotte Observer, the dominant newspaper in the city. As Hypothesis 2 predicts, the strength of the correlation between the respondent agenda and newspaper agenda systematically shifts with level of need for orientation. While both sets of data in Table 3 support the hypothesis, the sharpest discrimination occurs when uncertainty is defined operationally by the respondent's voting history. But in both analyses susceptibility to the agenda-setting effect of the newspaper increases directly with need for orientation.

With the deadline for this paper falling some 60 days after the Presidential election, only the preliminary data displayed here are available. Television data for Hypothesis 2 paralleling the newspaper data will be available later this year. Since the Charlotte survey was a panel study (June-October-November) with concurrent content analyses of TV and newspapers in June and October, replication and extension of the findings reported here will be available in the coming months. Both the sociological concept of agenda-setting and the psychological concept of need for orientation appear fruitful for documenting and explaining the political role and impact of the mass media.

For example, the oft cited empirical generalization that strong partisans are the heavier users of mass communications has been clarified by the concept of need for orientation. Under conditions of high relevance strong partisans

are not the heaviest users of mass communications. Specification of this condition was directly suggested by the theoretical model.

The evidence to date shows strong positive relationships between need for orientation and both use of mass communication and susceptibility to its agenda-setting effect.

TABLE 3. NEED FOR ORIENTATION AND AGREEMENT *WITH THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER AGENDA OF PUBLIC ISSUES.

Need for Orientation:	Group I	II	III
A.	+.67	+.06	+.07

Uncertainty: Voting History
Relevance: Interest in Presidential campaign

B.	+.39	+.27	+.07

Uncertainty: Certainty of Presidential candidate choice
Relevance: Interest in Presidential campaign

Source: Charlotte Survey. These analyses are based on readers of the Charlotte Observer only (N=127).

*Measured by rank-order correlations (Spearman's rho)

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